

## Third Sunday of Advent/Opening of the Holy Door for Year of Mercy

December 12/13, 2015 4:00 p.m. Vigil Mass St. Augustine Cathedral

I love the Third Sunday of Advent, don't you? (And it's not because we get to wear these really fashionable pink, a.k.a. rose, vestments!) No, it's because we're getting closer and closer to what Advent is preparing our hearts for in the first place: the coming of the Savior, Christ the Lord! The Advent Wreath is three-fourths lit! And the Scripture Readings for this Third Sunday turn our hearts and minds to all the reasons why we should be joy-full.

The Old Testament Prophet Zephaniah, as we heard in our First Reading today, told us that we should "*Shout for Joy!*" And he also told us why: because "*the Lord has removed the judgment against you.....(so) Fear not....the Lord your God is in your midst!*"

St. Paul told his beloved Philippians in our Second Reading, we should "*Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice!*" He too told us why we should rejoice: because "*the Lord is near.*"

And He really is: Christmas Day is less than two weeks away. While we might be running around in twelve different directions trying to get all our gifts bought and wrapped, and all the other aspects of our Christmas celebrations checked off our "to do" lists, (which for some of us might be causing no little amount of anxiety and stress), St. Paul tells us "*Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God.*" While all those tasks and projects on our "to-do" list are very important, it's more important that we keep them in the proper perspective to the spiritual preparations that we need to be focusing on during these last ten days of Advent.

Advent wants us to be able to see past the distractions and desires that we all encounter in each of our lives---the search for material wealth and worldly success and the lures and attractions of money and pleasure. Advent urges us to be able to see through all of those things to pursue and work hard to obtain the realities which are eternally important: to live a virtuous life; to choose to live according to God's ways; to spend ourselves in loving service to others in works of charity and justice. In other words, to have the Insight to **see** that the Lord **is** here and living among us.

And that's why in today's Gospel passage, the advice and direction that John the Baptist gave to the "crowds," "the tax collectors" and "the soldiers" who each asked "*What is it that we should do?*" is so important for us to heed. We are to treat one another with charity and justice, we are to make sure that we are honest and transparent in our dealings with others, and we should not be greedy or constantly looking for more than we need. We are to live our faith with joy, we are to rejoice in God's love and mercy, and we should be willing to give witness to our faith in every part of our lives, not just here at Church, but at work, with our friends, and most importantly in our homes, where we teach and encourage one another in our family relationships.

So this Third Sunday of Advent *is* very special. But this year, it's even more special because of what we were privileged to do at the very beginning of this Mass: the Opening of the Holy Door and the official launching of the Jubilee Year of Mercy which Pope Francis has called all of us to enter into from now until the end of November in 2016.

While Pope Francis already opened the Holy Door at St. Peter Basilica in Rome earlier this week, today he joins with Bishops all over the world who are at the same time opening Holy Doors in every Cathedral Church throughout the world, as we have just done together here for our Diocese, to make sure that every Catholic everywhere has an opportunity to experience the spiritual benefits of passing through the "Door of Mercy."

As we know, the Holy Door is a metaphor---a symbol of Jesus Christ, the Doorway to the Father's love and mercy---the one through whom we enter into eternal life. On the day of our baptism, which we reminded ourselves of at the beginning of today's Mass with the sprinkling rite, each of us was baptized into Christ.

The entire reason why we are going through such efforts to prepare well to celebrate Christmas is so that we can rejoice in why Jesus came to us in the first place---to be our Savior. And why do we need a Savior? Because all of us are sinners, and we cannot save ourselves. We must depend on God's love and mercy to save us through Christ.

That's why the very first words of the official document Pope Francis issued calling for this Year of Mercy are: "Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy." This special Holy Year of Mercy is an opportunity for us to realize in a new way, and at a deeper level in our souls, what it means for our God to be a God of love and mercy. Even though we all know that we are sinners, God loves us unconditionally; even though at times we consciously make sinful

choices, our God not only is willing to forgive us, but wants to forgive us----can't wait to forgive us. Our God of power and might chooses to be "*merciful and forgiving, slow to anger and abounding in great kindness.*"

Just as this Third Sunday of Advent is not the *only* Sunday that we should "Rejoice" but, in fact, that we should live our whole lives filled with the joyful awareness of God's love for us, so this Jubilee Year of Mercy is not the *only* time that we can experience God's love and mercy. However, it is *very* important that we make every effort to embrace this Year of Mercy and all the spiritual benefits available to us during this time. Pope Francis wants us to focus on the Good News of our faith, which begins with the birth of Christ to be God with us---Emmanuel---- "the face of the Father's mercy" and continues on to Jesus' profound gift of salvation to each of us which He accomplished through His suffering, death and resurrection.

If any one of us doesn't feel God's love and mercy, it's not because God has not offered it to us in countless ways and over countless times. If any one of us doesn't feel close to God, it's not because God hasn't gone to every measure possible to be close to us. And if any one of us thinks that we can get through this life, and enter into eternal life, without God's mercy and the sacraments of the Church, especially the mercy of God in the sacrament of reconciliation and the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, then we have fooled and duped ourselves seriously. Going to confession and receiving Holy Communion regularly are the most important ways that we can be one with Christ and to live in the joy of our Faith.

This Holy Door of Mercy, and the indulgences we can gain from a genuine spiritual attitude of openness to God's mercy when we go through that door, is a metaphor of the pilgrimage of each of our lives as we make our way through this world, preparing ourselves and working hard to enter into the door who is Christ which will lead us into the mansions of our heavenly home.

On this very special Gaudete Sunday, at the very beginning of this Jubilee Year of Mercy, let us rejoice! With every gift we buy and wrap, with every card we write, with every time we welcome the Lord Jesus into our hearts when we receive the Eucharist and go to confession, with every time we prayerfully go through the Holy Door; with every thought we think, every act we do, and every breath we take, may our Advent prayer be: "*Fear not...Rejoice in the Lord always...the Lord your God is with you!*"

God bless you, now and always!